

The Emergence of Modern Religion: Moses Mendelssohn, Neoclassicism, and Ceremonial Aesthetics

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It is almost a given that one cannot underestimate the radical changes shaping the creation of modern religion in the eighteenth century, a century recognized by most scholars as a period of profound transformation in politics, philosophy and the arts. Liberal religion emerges in climates marked by revolution and anticlericism in France, religious and philosophical Enlightenment in Germany, the rise of empiricism and democracy in England and the United States. Across Europe and the Atlantic, the period sees in the arts a shift to neoclassical (Greek and Roman) standards of style away from baroque religiosity and rococo “decadence.” But what was the nature of that transformation for modern Judaism in Germany? In the thought of Moses Mendelssohn, Enlightenment and Judaism were not separate features. I will try to show the philosophical coherence of the fusion. Mendelssohn believed that Judaism does have something vitally significant to contribute to human culture that reason cannot provide on its own. Overlooked by his critics, aesthetics and an aesthetic conception of Judaism play the key part in highlighting that abiding coherence of Mendelssohn’s contribution to modern religious thought, in which reason and revelation form parts of a variegated, single piece.

Looking past the caricature that reduces Enlightenment to “the unhappy consciousness” of avid intellectualism, dogmatic rationalism, atomistic individualism, it is possible to see that eighteenth-century Germany was indeed the ideal environment for the reinvention of religion and, with it, the creation of modern Judaism. Nearly all historians of the Enlightenment understand the unique openness of Germany and the German Enlightenment to religion. This has been attributed to the abiding hold of some putative German metaphysical temperament, although Ernst Cassirer spoke more to the point when he surmised that it was Leibnizian philosophy that acted as the “medium” within which modern religious thought could develop, as it was Leibniz who sought

in his system a pre-established harmony meant to “comprehend and reconcile the most antagonistic principles.”¹ Starting with Cassirer in the 1930s and then with Peter Gay in the 1960s, defenders of the Enlightenment point to its embrace of the body, the imagination, and the passionate sentiments. Philosophers such as Cassirer as well as Henry Allison, and art and architecture historians Robert Rosenblum, Hugh Honour, and Emil Kaufmann illuminate in Enlightenment and neoclassicism a great sifting motion, separating x from y (religion / state, inner truth / historical truth, reason / affect, etc. / etc.) and sorting through a complex and baroque intellectual and spiritual legacy that had become too heavy in the preceding century. There is a lightness that modern critics of the Enlightenment typically fail to appreciate, a quickening, a charm in that motion, a giddy floating [...] and then a reasonable reconciliation of parts and people into new systems that are free and flexible.²

My own addition to the argument about the coherence of Mendelssohn’s embrace of religion and reason hinges upon neoclassical and Enlightenment aesthetics. Once ecclesiastical authority has lost the right to coerce law and belief, a traditional religious culture is transformed into something new. It turns into “religion,” a semi-autonomous cultural node more or less distinct from other such nodes. Historically, at that very moment in eighteenth-century Europe when art acquires its own autonomy and begins to resemble religion, religion turns into art, a peculiar type of ceremonial art. In an avowedly secular state where citizens aspire to intellectual freedom and social mobility, religious authority, both moral and spiritual, can only be charismatic, and charisma is always rhetorical, always aesthetic.

Neoclassicism

If it is true that modern Judaism and Jewish philosophy owe their origins to this aesthetic century, it is because Judaism and Jewish philosophical expression have always been embedded into larger regnant styles at any one particular historical juncture. With Mendelssohn, it is clear how the formation of modern Judaism and Jewish philosophy build upon contemporary aesthetics. Mendelssohn is both marked and

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- 1 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 176, cf. 228.
 - 2 Henry E. Allison, *Lessing and the Enlightenment: His Philosophy of Religion and Its Relation to Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 126–127.

dated not just by the Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysics to which he continued to adhere but also by the neoclassical moment that dominated the middle to late parts of his century. To look back to that style with fresh eyes, and to see in what way Mendelssohn's presentation of Judaism was based on the best aesthetic taste available to him at the time, reveals first and foremost that Mendelssohn saw no distinction between Athens and Jerusalem. Judaism is not simply transformed according to some alien grid imposed by neoclassical standards because for Mendelssohn, reason, including a rationally sensuous style, was universal, neither Greek nor Jewish per se. The Jewish style developed by Mendelssohn in the eighteenth century drew on the reworking of an antique idyll common at the time. Particularly in its appeal to Scripture, especially to the poetry of psalms, the invention of modern Judaism shared the free and creative innovation and transformation of ancient classical models of Greek and Roman art by European artists, sculptors, and poets.

Art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) practically invented neoclassicism *de novo* in Germany, first in his *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (1755), followed by the massive *History of Ancient Art* (1764). Converting to Catholicism, he thereby secured access to the Vatican collections of Greco-Roman antiquities. Winckelmann resided in Rome for twelve years, a perch from which he was uniquely able to bring an exhaustive intimacy with Greek and Roman art to broader European reading public. As Alex Potts observes, Winckelmann undertook an immense gathering of visual sources, collecting bits of materials and imposing a new framework with which to understand them as a coherent whole.³ Praised by Goethe and Herder, Winckelmann was almost single handedly responsible for distilling the idea about ancient and antique art that took as their foundation the imitation of Greek antiquity and the perfection of Greek antiquity. As Hegel claimed, it was Winckelmann who opened “a whole new way of looking at things.”⁴

The classic ideal embodied in Greek sculpture would soon be displaced in nineteenth-century German philosophy (Schelling's *Philosophy of Art* and in Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Arts*) by the so-called romantic arts of painting, poetry, and especially music. In contrast to their color and tone, Greek sculpture appeared cold and self-contained.⁵ To

3 Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 13, 24.

4 *Ibid.*, 20.

5 Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 66, 182, 196; Georg Wilhelm

this day, it is still often hard to look past the hard stuff of antique marble to see the lively, sensual contours that shaped Greek art and the discussion of it in the eighteenth century. In contrast, Honour notes that for Winckelmann antique works of art were no mere relics. Honour draws attention to the spiritual idea that pervades sensual stuff in Winckelmann's description of the Apollo Belvedere, how Winckelmann brings to life the god's body, "marked by no vein or moved by no nerve, animated by a celestial spirit coursing like a sweet vapor through each and every part." Winckelmann presents dramatically his own dilating breast, his own ecstatic transport to Delos. According to Honour, Winckelmann was a poet and visionary, not a dry pendant.⁶ He saw in cold marble something flexible and quick, ideal bodies that are rough and Spartan, "a Theseus fed on flesh." It is hard to square the passion expressed in Winckelmann's art criticism with his famous insistence that all ideal art should reflect "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" unless we also recall with Winckelmann that this effect, like the sea, only seems calm at the surface.⁷

Dispelling the standard interpretation of neoclassicism as a homogenous, staid and sententious style in slavish imitation of the past, Rosenblum and Honour saw in neoclassicism an austere virile yet sentimental gesture in opposition to rococo decadence and frivolity. Its style was public, spirited, and frequently republican in a search for new forms that were as pure and elemental as a triangle or circle. In neoclassical art, sinuous line and pastel colors that dominated rococo style give way to box like perspective and somber color (or no color at all), as in the line drawings of John Flaxman's illustrations of Homer's *Illiad*. As Honour insists, neoclassicism was not a form of artistic naturalism or copy realism by which one sought merely to mimic the optical image of nature as it appears to the human eye. Neoclassicism reflects instead a "naturalistic idealism," based on universal notions of human reason and sentiments, a homogenous conception of nature, and their idealization, their apotheosis, in art.⁸ As observed by Winckelmann, "imitation" is not imitation of nature. It represents nature only in that the critic de-

Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F.P.B. Osmaston (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975), vol. 2, 175, vol. 3, 121–122, 139–141, 223–224.

6 Hugh Honour, *Neo-Classicism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), 57–62.

7 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, trans. Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1987); Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, trans. G. Henry Lodge, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1872), 203.

8 Honour, *Neo-Classicism*, 105–107; Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

mands a natural effect. But it remains more than nature in its spiritual comportment, demanding for itself from nature something much more than nature.⁹

His own study devoted primarily to French and English neoclassicism (his heroes are David, Ledoux, and Flaxman), Rosenblum pays great attention to neoclassicism as a complex form of secularism – the secularization of religious figures and mood and the sacralization of secular politics. In contrast to these paragons of French neoclassicism, a more genuine, pagan religious impulse seems to inflect Winckelmann’s art criticism – art transformed into religion, the apotheosis of the physical, transport, ecstasy, eternity in time.¹⁰ There is no reason not to think that his musings on art were purposefully made to stimulate something that for him came close to revelation.

In fact, Winckelmann’s embrace of ancient Greece did not exclude per se Christianity or even Judaism. Regarding Raphael’s Sistine Madonna at the Royal Gallery of Paintings in Dresden, Winckelmann observed the serenity of the Madonna’s face. For Winckelmann, the innocent and “more than female greatness” of the Christian image did not stand against a Greek aesthetic; she rather reflected the “same serenity with which the ancients imbued the depictions of their deities.”¹¹ Winckelmann even posited the existence of an art tradition in ancient Israel. In his estimation, the accounts of wrought images in the Bible enjoyed greater antiquity than anything we know from the Greeks. To be sure, sculpture was forbidden by Mosaic Law, but Winckelmann then adds “at least in regard to the divine.” Winckelmann believed firmly that artistic excellence was deeply conditioned by climate and physiology, a view that Herder came to also hold about culture and religion. Comparing the ancient Jews to the Phoenicians (in contrast to the Egyptians), Winckelmann speculated that their physical conformation would have been suitable for the expression of ideas of beauty. Hebrew art, Winckelmann surmised, must have risen to a degree of excellence, if not in sculpture, than in drawing and artistic labor, recalling from Scripture that Nebuchadnezzar exiled from Jerusalem alone a thousand artists expert in inlaid work.¹²

Winckelmann’s speculation about Jewish art stands as a rebuke against those nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers nourished on the putative divide between Athens and Jerusalem as well as on the fable

9 Cf. Winckelmann, *Reflections*, 69.

10 Cf. Honour, *Neo-Classicism*, 60–61.

11 Winckelmann, *Reflections*, 40, 41 (translation altered).

12 Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, 31, 108–109.

advanced by antisemites, rabbis, and philosopher-theorists that the Jews are “a nation without art” and that Judaism is aniconic and inherently hostile to beauty and to the arts, all because of the second commandment.¹³ At the dawn of modern art history in the eighteenth century, a place was made for the Jews, albeit an unequal one. That Winckelmann privileged the Greeks is so obvious as to deserve little comment; that was the incomparable art to which he had most direct access. About Egypt and Egyptian art his contempt was unequivocal. But the ancient Hebrews occupy a hypothetical position just beneath the Greeks, who of course occupied the summit in his schema. Unlike the difference he set between Egyptians and Greeks, the difference between Jews and Greeks is quantitative, not qualitative. Jews and Greeks exist on the same spectrum, allowing the former a measure of beauty so frequently denied them by philosophical writers in Germany in the following century.

Like any style, neoclassicism was not just a visual effect. It also reflected a pattern of thought. It stood in contrast to the art of luxury in baroque, in which the parts (of a building or a system of thought) are fused together and weighed down by too much detail. As presented by Rémy Saisselin, baroque art, society, religion, morality, and mores were built upon the conjunction between reality and appearance, upon glittering surface appearance, illusion and fantasy, which Enlightenment and neoclassicism would seek to unmask.¹⁴ Enlightenment and neoclassicism also stood in opposition to rococo, that style in which, according to its critics, beauty gives way to the merely pretty and agreeable.¹⁵ Against baroque and rococo, neoclassicism stood out as a serious style, the careful separation of parts *and* then their juxtaposition. Rosenblum’s analysis of the organization of the four central figures in David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (1786), the way the men occupy distinct positions in the box-like picture frame, allows us to see the following. By drawing “precise boundaries,” neoclassicism makes possible for thought a vigorous assertion of will, moral energy invigorating mind and body,

13 Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

14 Rémy G. Saisselin, *The Enlightenment against the Baroque: Economics and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 5–6, 28–33, 46.

15 *Ibid.*, 58. In particular, the baroque came to be seen as static and rigid. On the “frozen baroque,” designated as the last state of the baroque, in which the baroque building scheme was left intact but without its animating liveliness, cf. Emil Kaufmann, *Architecture in the Age of Reason: Baroque and Post-Baroque in England, Italy, and France* (Hamden, CN: Archon Books, 1966), 38–41.

a “metallic rigidity” and “tonic clarity.”¹⁶ The deliberate separation of parts contributes to more clearly defined juxtapositions in both painting and in thought.

A direct connection links the presentation of physical bodies and mental organization in eighteenth-century art criticism and philosophy. Winckelmann, for example, professed to see how the physiognomy of dark brown bodies, sunken noses, large breasted women coupled with morose and supernaturalistic modes of thought and severe laws based on absolutist monarchy all combine to cultivate a stiff and motionless art of straight lines, arms hanging down along and united with sides, and no action.¹⁷ It should therefore not surprise one that Egyptian art repelled Mendelssohn for similar reasons. In *Jerusalem*, he inveighed against hieroglyphic image-script, a bias that finds its theoretical basis in the essay “On the Sublime and Naïve in the Fine Sciences,” where Mendelssohn inveighed against excessive embellishment. “Expansion by means of adjoining conceptions is unnatural since the latter must all, as it were, recede into the darkness of shadows. Because of the length of time it takes, the analysis of the central concept would weaken the awe since it would let us feel the sublime only little by little.”¹⁸ The point here is that Mendelssohn and Lessing enjoined a lighter, more simple notion of beauty. For Mendelssohn this meant a preference for the more naïve, unaffected form of expression, “simpler and unadorned” expression that Mendelssohn found in the Hebrew Bible and in odes by Horace.¹⁹

Mendelssohn made a point to draw distinctions between one thing and another in his metaphysics, in his epistemology, in his aesthetics and in his political and religious philosophy. In his essay “On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences” (1763), he argued that mathematical truths are innate to human mind, but in tangled form. The function of thought is to “unpack or untangle,” to analyze a concept and to make distinct what was obscure.²⁰ The same is true regarding representations.²¹ Since the intrinsic characteristics of a thing are all bound up together with those

16 Rosenblum, *Transformations*, 68–74; Honour, *Neo-Classicism*, 35–36, 42; cf. Kaufmann, *Architecture in the Age of Reason*.

17 Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, vol. 1, 37, 63–72.

18 Moses Mendelssohn, “On the Sublime and Naïve in the Fine Sciences,” in Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 192–232, here 199.

19 *Ibid.*, 200.

20 Moses Mendelssohn, “On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences,” in Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 251–306, here 257.

21 *Ibid.*, 259.

of other things, Mendelssohn recognized the constant need to clarify first principles and basic definitions kept constantly in mind at the same time.²² In his aesthetics, he drew the distinction between beauty and the sublime, real illusion versus aesthetic illusion, representation and object; In his essay “What is Enlightenment?” he drew the distinction between “Enlightenment” and “culture.” In “Pope a Metaphysician,” he sought to distinguish poetry and philosophy. His philosophy of politics and religion in *Jerusalem* relies upon the distinctions between state / church, eternal truth / historical truths, between duties we owe to the state versus those that we owe to God. In short, the separation between things was a necessary precondition by which to come to a clear understanding as to their optimum interrelation. The point was not to create a hostile, binary separation, seeing as how the poles that are separated are brought together.

In their reassessment of neoclassical art and aesthetics, Rosenblum, Honour, and Potts allow one to see in Mendelssohn’s presentation of Judaism a severe mode that thinks through critically and limits the phenomenon of ecclesiastical authority and a sensuous-beautiful-sublime mode that presents the true face of beautiful Judaism.²³ An exemplar of Enlightenment *and* neoclassicism, Mendelssohn clearly saw his own work in Winckelmann’s light. In a late letter to Johann Georg Zimmermann in September 1784, Mendelssohn pictured “the ideal man [...] who would do for the cause of God what Winckelmann did for paganism.” Mendelssohn himself had only been able to collect the material, and hoped that a more fortunate mortal, perhaps his own son Joseph, might make use of it.²⁴ Mendelssohn will have made the same appeal to Hebrew poetry and to ritual act. We see in him the same naturalistic idealism that Honour finds in Winckelmann. In *Kohélet Musar*, Mendelssohn extolled the beauty of nature and the glory of Hebrew language, of whose antiquity he took exceptional pride in *Or l’Netivah* (1778), his introduction to his translation of the Pentateuch.²⁵ In Judaism, Mendelssohn wanted his reader to *see* the exercise of two basic forms – simple common sense and profound sentiments – as they are caught up in a beautiful and sublime play of signs that are more than

22 Ibid., 272–274.

23 Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal*, cf. especially 7–8, 67–68, 110.

24 Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 729.

25 On the link between Psalms, natural theology, and aesthetics in Mendelssohn’s thought, cf. David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), ch. 5.

simply beautiful and sublime insofar as these point to larger theological and metaphysical truths.

Although he never would have admitted it to others or seen it himself, Mendelssohn's Jewish thought was part of the neoclassical rebellion against "tradition," which in this context means the fusion of parts in seventeenth-century baroque art and culture. In his book on Mendelssohn, Sorkin makes inviting notice of "baroque Judaism," by which he intends the Judaism of Talmud and Kabbalah. He might well have mentioned the false messianic movement of Shabbatai Zvi that shuddered seventeenth-century Jewish society. In a brief, passing nod, Scholem compared Sabbatianism to the contemporary European baroque, highlighting the surplus of meanings, the concept of tradition as a "vast treasury of living allegory" and of "images and prefigurations" presided over by the "magic wand of faith" producing "water for the thirsty imagination from even the most dry and rocklike texts."²⁶ God, Torah, and Israel are the block-like parts fused in the famous dictum of the Zohar carried over into the seventeenth century. In response to his son Joseph's giving up his Hebrew studies, Mendelssohn seemed almost resigned in dismissing instruction in Talmud as *pilpul*, a "sterile kind of acumen."²⁷ While he continued to make loving mention of the rabbis, and while it remains possible to see in Mendelssohn a modern type of rabbinic reasoning, it is clear that Bible and Hebrew clearly took pride of place in his more modern, and pared down conception of Judaism, at least at the surface level of his worldview.

Ceremony

The synthesis of neoclassical style, Enlightenment philosophy, and traditional Judaism in Mendelssohn is best seen from the standpoint of semiotic aesthetics, and it is from this standpoint that we can address the arguments leveled by critics like Alexander Altmann, who did not think that Mendelssohn was able to harmonize Judaism and Enlightenment, and Allan Arkush, who suspects that Mendelssohn did not truly believe that Judaism has anything of value to offer human culture that reason could not provide on its own. For Mendelssohn, Judaism remains revelation; not the revelation of a universal truth because in his view, such truths can only be universal, not particular; but rather the revelation of

26 Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, trans. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 803–804.

27 Cited in Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, 727.

certain historical truths (namely, what he still believed was God's revelation to Israel at Sinai) and law, a ceremonial law composed of ritual acts, each one a visible sign pointing cognition to the comprehension and enjoyment of those universal truths required for human felicity. As Cassirer observed in his monumental *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932), the Enlightenment appeal to aesthetics was an appeal to a *sensus communis*. A modern aesthetic (the artificial, pared down sign) and a few simple religious truths make modern liberal religion possible, as well as foreground a particular Jewish contribution to this new religious formation.

Sign: The deep coherence of Mendelssohn's conception of Judaism and its claim to reason stem from its investment, not in theoretical doctrine, but in the rational organization of aesthetic signs – visual signs, artificial signs, beautiful signs, living signs, staged signs, sublime signs. The advantage enjoyed by Judaism over Christianity, as understood by Mendelssohn, is that Judaism does not demand cognitive assent to the putative revelation of doctrinal truths that are particularistic and opaque to human reason. This was the challenge posed to Leibniz, who in the end was only able to assert that the mysteries of Christianity, at the very least, did not run counter to a reason unable to prove their truth apodictically. Judaism, in contrast, is presented by Mendelssohn as a system of “law” that points cognition toward the contemplation of three eternal truths – the existence of God, providence, and the immortality of the soul – that Mendelssohn and other Enlightenment moderates accepted as matters of universal common sense. Mendelssohn insisted that after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE this “law” is no longer civic. It is now purely ceremonial, or ritual. Each ritual component – a blessing or a prayer or the laying of phylacteries or placing a mezuzah on one's doorposts – is looked upon as a visible or audible sign or sign-act, whose impact upon cognition is mediated through the body, by the tongue or hand or arm or eye or ear by which such acts are performed.

Mendelssohn's primary interest in both his early aesthetic theory and in *Jerusalem*, his theory of Judaism, is the *visible* sign. In designating abstract concepts, the visible sign enjoys the advantage of permanence, an advantage lacked by audible signs, whose advantage is said to be immediacy. (In aesthetic theory after Mendelssohn, already with Lessing, the ratio would be reversed. The visible sign came to be associated with immediacy, immediate comprehension, whereas the audible sign endures over time). But permanent signs are problematic. Mendelssohn speculated that the first visible “sign” used to designate abstract concepts was the thing itself, the physical object, which then is designated by an image of the thing, then as an outline, a part of an outline, and ul-

timately the hieroglyph. In this schema, script constitutes the last stage in the process, a visual mark that allows for the organization of audible signs into classes. Mendelssohn explicitly rejected the opinion that script is merely or simply the sign of sounds, pointing instead to more fluid transpositions of script into speech and speech into script. By designating a multitude of sounds with one single visual character, script extends the power of human capacities, while lending itself to misunderstanding, political manipulation, and ultimately idolatry, the struggle against which will demand the creation of a flexible visible sign system, not the complete abolition of visibility (as per later theorists of Judaism at work under the impress of German Idealism).

The Beautiful Sign: According to Mendelssohn, a percept is beautiful “whenever we perceive a large array of an object’s features all at once without being able to separate them distinctly from each other [...] The individual concepts of the manifold must lose their tiresome distinctness so that the whole can shine forth in an all-the-more transfigured light.” This whole encompasses line, surface, body, movement, change, and also similarity, variety, harmony of parts in relation to that whole, and ultimately the transformation of one form into another.²⁸ For Mendelssohn, beauty is defined as unity in multiplicity. What I think this means is a multiplicity brought into the presentation of a unity. In the beautiful representation or image, we perceive a multiplicity of parts in a single whole, all at the same time. Beauty reflects a basic human incapacity. We are unable to unravel overly complex structures. The Enlightenment eye was therefore repulsed by gothic architecture, a (baroque) dance that is too elaborate, or the confusion of organs, nerve, and tissue that we *know* lie just underneath the skin. Instead, we prefer and take pleasure in the beauty of a simple sign and surface representation.²⁹

Anything can be made to appear beautiful, even tragedy, the ugly in nature, and suicide; even Judaism and Scripture. Everything depends upon the light, the “transfiguring light,” that casts and recasts the object or act. For Spinoza, Scripture was too mired in the imagination to offer any reliable or exact guide to philosophical truth apart from a few simple, universal ideas. For Mendelssohn it is precisely this characteristic, its beauty, wherein lies its cognitive value. Scripture remains for him the divine law book, which is for a large portion of humanity “a source of insight from which it draws new ideas, or according to which it corrects

28 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 172.

29 *Ibid.*, 22–23.

old ones.”³⁰ The Bible is not just a Jewish book; based in law, it is not even a religious one. It instead represents a book for many people, for all people perhaps potentially. This is a matter of perspective. Mendelssohn admitted that, “At first glance, to be sure, the truth presents itself therein in its simplest attire, and as it were, free of any pretensions. Yet the more closely you approach it, and the purer, the more innocent, the more loving and longing is the glance with which you look upon it, the more it will unfold before you its divine beauty, veiled lightly, in order not to be profaned by vulgar and unholy eyes.”³¹

With Scripture, all the hostile critic can see is the simple attire, a simplicity to be transformed by Mendelssohn in his “naïve” approach (a sly approach that knowingly pretends to be “simple”) into the very condition of its beauty and of the power by which it points to the truth. On the virtue of simplicity, Mendelssohn would have learned from Winckelmann a type of Greek aesthetic wisdom rejecting the complex forms represented by the gothic and by the baroque. In neoclassical art and architecture and in pre-Kantian Enlightenment philosophy, the truth is simple, the form even simpler. For Mendelssohn, the expression of simple truth in naïve form gives itself to the longing glance. Subjective desire steeped in the imagination, and the sensual pleasure we take in beauty prove to be one of the conditions upon which we know something true about the object, about Judaism, to see the truths to which Scripture, as sign, points cognition in its own unique style.

The Living Sign: For Mendelssohn, the universal truths taught by Judaism are best conveyed by the ritual sign, in this case ceremonial law, which is most beautiful because it is simple and because it moves. In his most celebrated argument, Mendelssohn reconceived the entirety of ceremonial, ritual law as a living script. The living sign is visible.³² The “ceremonial law itself,” wrote Mendelssohn, “is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart [...] What a student himself did and *saw* being done from morning till night pointed to religious doctrines and convictions, and spurred him on to follow his teacher, to watch him, to observe all his actions,” and to obtain instruction. With Mendelssohn, we watch the law; we do not merely listen to it, as does the congregant who listens to a preacher, or the university student to a professor who

30 Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover, N.H. and London: Brandeis University Press by University Press of New England, 1983), 99.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 102–103.

reads from written notes.³³ As action, ceremony contributes to “living, spiritual instruction, which can keep pace with all changes of time and circumstances, and can be varied and fashioned according to a pupil’s needs, ability, and power of comprehension.”³⁴ So, while, like any visual sign, the living script of ceremonial law enjoys the advantage of permanence.³⁵ The law is removed from imagery, but not from visibility. It “keeps pace.” As a fixed code of living script based, not on doctrine, but on motile action, its meanings move in time with a quick gait.

The living sign moves, motion and speed being axiomatic features of neoclassical aesthetics, although not as famous as proportion and symmetry. For Lessing, the superiority of poetry was its temporal constitution, the free play that allows the imagination to extend itself over time.³⁶ Homer describes Helen’s beauty not by her physical appearance per se, but her enchanting effect on the Trojan elders. Poetry turns beauty into charm, defined by Lessing as “beauty in motion.”³⁷ For all that he privileged poetry over painting, Lessing recognized that the line between the two are not entirely set, conceding the limited indulgence by which the painter or sculptor might represent motion in the folds of a garment.³⁸ More open to plastic expression than Lessing, Winckelmann contrasted the living spirit in Greek sculpture to the immobile figures and lack of action in Egyptian art.³⁹ No dead thing, sculpture was seen by Winckelmann as possessed of a living spirit, the Pygmalion effect when a sculpted image like the Apollo Belvedere takes on its own erotic, motile life before the eye of the observer who swoons before the palpable beauty it presents.⁴⁰ Like the sea, beauty seems calm only at the surface.⁴¹

The Staged Sign: Ritual, the living script of law, is not even religious, if by religion one means doctrine and dogma. It is more like theater. Its movement is stage-like in its performance. Pay attention to the architectural imagery as it appears throughout *Jerusalem*, on whose very first pages we are asked to see state and religion as “pillars” that need to be

33 Ibid., 103.

34 Ibid., 102.

35 Ibid., 107.

36 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York: Noonday Press, 1957), 16–17.

37 Ibid., 136–137.

38 Ibid., 110–111.

39 Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art*, vol. 1, 37, 70.

40 Ibid., vol. 2, 313.

41 Ibid., vol. 2, 202; cf. Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal*, 2.

“balanced” in order to prevent them from weighing down the “foundations of social life.” Mendelssohn then shifts the reader’s eye to landscape, the definition of “boundaries” between different “provinces.”⁴² Later, Judaism is presented as the “cornerstone” upon which Christianity rests.⁴³ A rhetorical question – “Who can say I have entered into God’s sanctuary, looked over the whole of his plan, and am able to determine the measure, goal, and limits of his purposes?” – is asked twice, almost verbatim.⁴⁴ These architectural details, the entire setting, Jerusalem, the ceremonial law contrived, Judaism are an artful-artificial assemblage. The architectural features form a theatrical stage set, while the landscapes, the boundaries and provinces and pastures lend backdrop scenery. And there on stage, we see a public forum and a young man. “In everything a youth saw being done in public as well as private dealings, on all gates and on all doorposts, in whatever he turned his eyes or ears to, he found occasion for inquiring and reflecting, occasion to follow an older and wiser man at his every step, to observe his minutest actions and doings with childlike attentiveness, [etc].”⁴⁵

The stage has been set; the gates, the doorposts. The young epebe follows the older man offstage, at which point Mendelssohn starts to retell the tale of the Golden Calf in order to explain how, in Judaism, God’s love for the people trumps the capricious power exercised by the gods in Greek paganism, or the capricious power typically associated with Judaism itself, usually by its critics. At this point in *Jerusalem*, the highpoint just prior to the final summarization of Mendelssohn’s argument, the reader is now given to hear the converse between Moses and God. Back and forth they speak. Moses refusing to take the people any further until God complies. And then when God complies, the prophet goes on to make a still bolder request, to see the presence of God. And God submits, agreeing to let all His goodness pass before his eye. “What man’s feelings are so hardened,” Mendelssohn wants to know, “that he can read this with dry eyes?”⁴⁶ Without any announcement, Mendelssohn has presented the contents of Exodus 33 in dramatic dialogue form, followed by one more (less dramatically presented) dialogue consisting of Mendelssohn’s own theological confession to a “venerable friend” about revelation and the beneficence of divine chastisement. And then

42 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 33.

43 Ibid., 87.

44 Ibid., 118, cf. 133.

45 Ibid., 119.

46 Ibid., 122–123.

our author concludes by presenting more poetry on the same theme from Psalms.⁴⁷

The conversations, especially the one between God and Moses, move back and forth declaratively and hence more quickly than one might ordinarily expect in more philosophical dialogues. The tempo lends itself to the dramatic pathos and sentiment, to which Mendelssohn directly appeals. The aesthetic transformation of Scripture into theater and psalms into poetry drives home a point made by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Theater, museums, and concerts were “platforms” for the new social-political-intellectual form represented by the bourgeois public sphere.⁴⁸ One can find such a platform, not just in Athens, but even in *Jerusalem*, reimagined, reconfigured, reconstructed as such. The transformation is sociable and broadminded, as is the understanding evinced by Mendelssohn for Indian myth and his assurance that people in the South Seas do not need Christian missionaries to come teach them the truths required to secure temporal or eternal felicity. In the spirit of Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise*, also set in this-worldly Jerusalem, the staging is deliberately cosmopolitan, meant to open European prejudice to the articulation of Hebrew difference couched in a familiar aesthetic-theatrical milieu.

The Sublime: From this worldly stage, the beautiful, dynamic sign points the eye to the big thing, that is to say, sublime truths about God. *Jerusalem* is the place to consider a Jewish sublime, one that foregrounds, not the *power* of the gods or fates, as in Greek tragedy, but rather the sublime power of divine love and forgiveness in Hebrew Scripture. For Mendelssohn, the first “object” of sublimity is the idea of God, not the overwhelming pyrotechnics at Sinai, which can prove nothing on their own. The second “object” of sublimity is not an object, but a subject, the sublime expression of the lawgiver. The Israelites come to the mountain, the reader comes to or from Scripture and Judaism, already with the sublime idea implanted as an innate idea or taught in the days leading up to the theophany. Without the sublime idea of “a unique, eternal Deity,” the sensible miracle is not recognized as miracle. Revelation can only teach historical truths about God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the redemption from Egypt, and laws, not eternal truths like the existence of God.⁴⁹ The Jews are not commanded

47 Ibid., 123–125.

48 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 14, 43.

49 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 98.

to believe nor forbidden to doubt. Rather, Scripture presents God, the only God in heaven above and on the earth below, to the people Israel who see and trust.⁵⁰ One might add, they see because they trust and trust because they see the sublimity of divine love and forgiving atonement.⁵¹ Citing Scripture, Mendelssohn maintains, “All power is God’s alone / And love is Thine, o Lord” (Ps. 62:12–13). “He showed His ways to Moses, All merciful, etc.” (Ps. 103).

All this was prepared already in the aesthetic theory that dominates the *Philosophical Writings*, which is where one will find Mendelssohn’s most interesting and important *theological* thinking. Unlike the case of Edmund Burke, Mendelssohn does not reduce the sublime to an external object. Unlike Kant, however, he does not reduce the sublime to the judging object. The external object, the large and powerful object, is still sublime, as Kant would say, either mathematically or dynamically. For Mendelssohn, the object can be sublime, and so too poetic expression, which can intensify otherwise ordinary objects. In addition to this fundamental distinction, Mendelssohn was the first to introduce the idea of mixed sentiments. And he applies this notion to the contemplation of God, making it poetic in the process. As seen above, there are unpleasant associations in *Jerusalem* with divine punishments, understood as chastisements, in Hebrew, *yissurin shel ahavah* (chastisements of love). That a theological point was also aesthetic for Mendelssohn was already made clear in both “Rhapsody” and in “On the Sublime and Naïve in the Fine Sciences.” In art and poetry, unpleasant feelings actually are pleasant; and in religion, Mendelssohn claimed that the greatest pleasure is a mixed sentiment before the divine perfection, a kind of holy trembling.⁵²

Complex and discursive or simple and poetic, there are different modes in which to say something about divinity, even if there are no modes adequate to this perfection and to the mixed sentiment it compels. Because no expression is up to the task, the most adequate theological mode is the least adequate, philosophically. Thinking back to Wolff, we can surmise that Mendelssohn privileged the former mode because of (not despite) its lack of precision. “God, world, eternity, and so on,” because the signified is so great, represent objects that no finite thought can reach. “The sign [the poet] makes use of” therefore “always remains naïve in comparison to the matter.” By naïve is meant simple, brief, “silent.” The psalter (“the holy poet”) is in this respect, no dif-

50 Ibid., 100.

51 Ibid., 121–122.

52 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 145.

ferent than the sublime poets whom Mendelssohn will flag in the same breath – Albrecht von Haller, Aeneas, Klopstock.⁵³ “What God willed came to be” is abstract compared to “God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.” Concepts depend for their animation upon the sensuous naïve-sublime poetic image. “The almighty wink, *supercilio*, and the sensuous effect, *moventis*, arouse in our imagination the sublime image of a Jupiter of Phidias. We see the almighty, if I be permitted to speak, face to face.”⁵⁴ Mendelssohn not only implies that one cannot “see” God face to face anywhere else than in poetry, and in Scripture, insofar as its mode is poetic. He explicitly states, referring to the phrase “let there be light,” that it was “the aim of the Lawgiver to say something sublime by this.”⁵⁵

Eternal truths are not revealed by direct revelation or made known through word or script (both of which prove inadequate because they are so limited, “intelligible” only here and now). Eternal truths are revealed to all rational creatures through *things* and concepts, inscribed in the soul and comprehensible at all times and in all places. In the words of the psalter, identified by Mendelssohn as “[o]ur much-quoted poet,” “The heavens declare the majesty of God / [...] And night giveth instruction to night / No teaching, no words / Without their voice being heard / The message goeth forth [...] To the place where He hath set a tent for the sun.” In this passage, thing finally trumps word. Universally beneficent, these eternal truths are sublime like the sun warming the entire globe as it speeds through its orb.⁵⁶ The attention here is not oral or aural. Rather the focus is *ocularcentric*, fixed on light and illumination that renders speech silent.

After Enlightenment and Neoclassicism

In terms of content: A more open and more bracing spirit of self-criticism will come to distinguish nineteenth-century liberal Judaism, in comparison to which Mendelssohn’s model of Judaism appears quaint. Mendelssohn was critical of the Enlightenment. Internal to the operation of *Bildung*, he recognized as constitutive the tensions between “enlightenment” (the rational exercise of critical faculties) and “culture” (arts and manners). His ability to see these tensions here only calls

53 Ibid., 202.

54 Ibid., 200.

55 Ibid., 218.

56 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 126.

greater attention to his failure to note similar tensions in Judaism. Borrowing from Hegel's critique of Spinoza's conception of "substance" (it lacked any internal conception of negativity) and his critique of Greek sculpture (its animation rests only at the surface) allows one to say the same about Mendelssohn's conception of Judaism. While it enjoys its own surface dynamic, the conception appears static when compared to nineteenth-century models of Judaism, because it lacks any moment of negation. In this conception, Judaism appears as a tripartite substance (truths, history, law), but there is no tension between any of these parts. The parts work only too well. There is no sense that Judaism or Jewish life stand in need of a restructuring without which it might cease to function. There is no irony internal to Judaism, no sense that Judaism might have been different than it is, no sense that the configuration of parts and contents that constitute Judaism in one age or place might bear little to no resemblance or, more radically, little to no relation to the Judaism of another age or place. Unable to anticipate this thought, Mendelssohn's work suggests how the transition from the dynamism of Enlightenment to the intensified dynamism of spirit (the de-formation and re-formation of contents in Herder, Hegel, and Reform Judaism) is a movement that transpires as an integral feature within liberal thought, philosophy, and culture.

The failure in Mendelssohn has less to do with philosophical coherence and more to do with style. Indeed, the thought is only too coherent, the transitions too smooth. As Mendelssohn argued, on philosophical grounds, no gaps are allowed to appear in the infinite system of truths apprehended in Divine Mind.⁵⁷ Everything that happens has to have its reason.⁵⁸ The real problem with Mendelssohn is not in his putative conservatism or in his use of reason. It points instead to the limit of his imagination and style. Modern and postmodern readers have been trained to see a more disconnected organization and disorganization of forms, abrupt shifts and sudden annihilations that Mendelssohn was unable to imagine. It is not his confidence in reason that dates Mendelssohn, in that his confidence was fairly limited. What dates him is aesthetic – the style that gave shape to the content of his reason. In what is probably the clearest link between Enlightenment aesthetics and postmodernism, Mendelssohn preferred the beautiful surface.⁵⁹ The presentations are too schematic. They do not reveal enough historical flesh and blood. Again, this is not to say that Mendelssohn's conception of religion and

57 Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, 287.

58 *Ibid.*, 288.

59 *Ibid.*, 23.

of Judaism is static. While it was not static at all, it remains true nevertheless that all the action courses over the surface of the body. In this, David Novak and other critics of Enlightenment religion and Enlightenment thought are correct to say that there is something “superficial” at work here, that it lacks “depth,” but only in this technical and non-pejorative sense.⁶⁰ Its purity of occularism, the pure skin and smooth surface remain unparalleled to this day.

60 David Novak, *The Jewish Social Contract: An Essay in Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 164–87.

