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Steven Nadler
Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi of Amsterdam

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Steven Nadler's *Menasseh ben Israel* is pure biography. After an artful recreation of the surprisingly generous eulogy by Menasseh's nemesis in life, Rabbi Saul Mortera, Nadler narrates his fascinating and truly historic life in a straight plotline from the ordeals of Menasseh's father fleeing the grip of the Portuguese Inquisition to Menasseh's premature death while returning to Amsterdam from his unsuccessful mission to negotiate the readmission of Jews to England. Nadler writes largely for a general reader and does not interrupt the story with academic explication of the historiography of his subject or his own methodology. The resulting portrait is an appealing and historically-meaningful emblem, thankfully shorn of tedious moralistic superscriptions or subscriptions, a biography that allows the reader to witness a complex historical development—the dramatic improvement in Christian-Jewish relations in seventeenth-century Europe—through the portrayal of the prodigious accomplishments of its protagonist. Nadler is able to let history tell its own story in this case because the trajectory of Menasseh and his Amsterdam community, "the New Jerusalem," embodies the revival of Sephardi culture in Western Europe and beyond. Given the significance of Amsterdam and its rabbi, and given the lucid and compelling storyline, this biography would be an ideal place for anyone to begin an exploration of the remarkable history of Judaism in early modern Europe, especially the innovations in Christian-Jewish relations.

In a sense, Menasseh became an "apostle to the Gentiles" (the epithet coined by Cecil Roth) by accident. From the very beginning of his career, he saw himself as a rabbi serving the newly arriving Marrano immigrants in Amsterdam as they returned to the practice of Judaism and tried to deepen their understanding and observance of their ancestral faith. To serve this community, which grew with astonishing speed, as well as others throughout Europe and soon the Americas (he once aspired to emigrate to Recife, Brazil), Menasseh established the first Jewish printing house in Amsterdam, thereby laying the foundation for what would be one of the most illustrious Jewish printing centers of all time (pp. 39-57). Although

eventually his publishing would support Ashkenazi communities as well, he initially focused on the "Portuguese Jews," producing works in Spanish (and Hebrew) in order to explain the basics of Judaism and to deliver standard Jewish prayer books, Bibles, volumes of the Talmud, and other materials for their use.

An unintended result was that his works were also accessible and appealing to Christian scholars. The first volume of his *Conciliador* (1632), an attempt to explain inconsistences in the Bible written explicitly to help Spanish-speaking Jews return to their faith, immediately attracted many Christian readers interested in Jewish approaches to the Bible. Though initially surprised by his Christian readership, he soon embraced it and began composing works with both Christian and Jewish readers in mind in addition to some intended primarily for Christian scholars, with some of them published in Latin. Christians even collaborated on some of his subsequent publications, including a printing of the Mishnah, and several of his works were dedicated to prominent Christians (p. 135). For Christian Europe, Menasseh became the most prominent Jewish voice of the age. A steady stream of visitors called on him in Amsterdam and many more corresponded. Henrietta Maria, Queen of England, famously attended the Talmud Torah synagogue for his sermon in 1642 (p. 109). The only contemporary Jew with a comparable impact on the Christian world was the Venetian rabbi Leon Modena (1571-1648), who wrote the exceedingly influential *Historia de gli riti hebraici* (*The History of the Jewish Rites*), initially for presentation to James I of England, originally published in Italian (Paris, 1637), and frequently translated and printed in other European languages, including English.

Menasseh's most significant adventure was his journey to London to promote the readmission of Jews to England, a land from which they had been banished since 1290. In this effort, he tapped the interest of Christian millenarians who were inclined to support readmission in order to fulfill a Christian interpretation of prophecy that, before the second coming of Christ could occur, Jews would be scattered to every corner of the world (based on Deuteronomy 28:64 and 30:1-5). Other English supporters of the initiative, however, were interested because of the great commercial success of Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Sephardi. Menasseh stayed in London for two years (late September 1655-early October 1657) as the guest of the English government while his proposed terms for readmission were debated. To support that initiative, he published several works, including his powerful defense of Judaism, *A Vindication of the Jews* (1656). The work remained influential for over a century, and no less a figure than Moses Mendelssohn would translate it into German as late as 1782. During the negotiations, the existence of a tiny clandestine community of Sephardic traders already residing in London was exposed (p. 205). Fortunately, despite high levels of anti-Jewish activism, the community was allowed to continue practicing quietly, partly on the grounds that the expulsion of 1290, as a royal decree, was deemed invalid. In the end, however, Oliver Cromwell was not able to muster sufficient support for a legislated (and regulated) readmission according to Menasseh's proposed terms. The Sephardic rabbi, though now a celebrity in England, departed for Amsterdam in low spirits from the denouement and also distraught over the recent death of his son Samuel. He died on

20 November 1657 before reaching his home. In his magnificent biography of Menasseh (1932; 2nd ed. 1945), Cecil Roth contended that Menasseh's intervention should not be seen as a historical failure, for the Jewish community in England was able to grow somewhat more naturally without parliamentary sanction from the Commonwealth and arguably more securely since in the restoration of the monarchy Charles II repealed legislation under the Commonwealth.

Although it is not acknowledged as such (apart from the occasional endnote on a specific topic), Roth's biography is the solid foundation for this new version. Nonetheless, even if it offers no major revisions of Roth's portrayal, Nadler's work renders Roth's obsolete in large measure because he has successfully integrated the scholarship of the intervening half-century. This reader says farewell rather wistfully to Roth's scholarly gem but also welcomes Nadler's worthy replacement wholeheartedly. Its literary elegance graces a magisterial command of history.