

**REVIEW**

Michah Gottlieb, Ed.

*Moses Mendelssohn:  
Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible*

(Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), softcover, xxvii + 267 pp.

Benjamin E. Sax, Virginia Tech

Michah Gottlieb's edited volume *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, and the Bible* offers the English-reading public new insights into the thought of the German-Jewish Enlightenment thinker Moses Mendelssohn. Even though Mendelssohn was an extraordinarily prolific writer, much of his work is not translated from the original German; many English language scholars therefore rely on secondary accounts of his work. Gottlieb's volume provides English translations of some of Mendelssohn's Hebrew and German writings (by Curtis Bowman, Elias Sacks, and Allen Arkush). Gottlieb's goal in doing this is, as he puts it, to provide the English reader "with a more comprehensive picture of Mendelssohn's attempt to balance Judaism and the Enlightenment than has been available until now" (p. xxi). Indeed, his volume addresses the long-lamented scholarly neglect of Mendelssohn's contributions to the European Enlightenment, and specifically to the Enlightenment in Jewish society (the *Haskala*), as well as of his myriad commentaries on the Hebrew Bible. The time, it seems, was ripe to look beyond Mendelssohn as merely the first "modern Jew" (as he is often called). This is no minor or unimportant task.

Gottlieb arranges his translations both thematically and historically, framing Mendelssohn's writings on Judaism and Christianity within three major controversies during his lifetime: the Lavater Affair, the controversy that inspired *Jerusalem*, and the Pantheism controversy. Gottlieb wants these translations to guide students and scholars to revisit the salient theological and political questions of the Enlightenment and to allow them to hear Mendelssohn's concerns. Mendelssohn was a literary polymath. His interests spanned an impressive disciplinary spectrum, and his acumen in discussing these matters is equally impressive. By peering into the small window Gottlieb provides onto Mendelssohn's writings, we are able to read the work of a precise scholar who was at home in Jewish and non-Jewish communities, and who was also a religious thinker engaged in the most important issues of his time. Gottlieb's contribution here cannot be understated.

Gottlieb's volume depicts Mendelssohn as intimately connected to his Judaism (his short letter to Naphtali Herz Homberg in September, 1783, is a poignant example [p. 124]) as well as to the general philosophical, cultural, and theological issues of his time. The book is divided into three sections—the Polemical Writings, the Writings on the Bible, and Miscellany (including most of Mendelssohn's writings on rational theology)—though the first section is much longer than the second and third. This is important in that it demonstrates Mendelssohn's involvement in numerous controversies, often with Christians. It also offers readers a glimpse into his polemical strategies, for he writes provocatively and with an awareness that much is at stake. Take for example Johann Casper Lavater's public challenge to Mendelssohn to accept the Swiss philosopher and scientist Charles Bonnet's "philosophical investigation of the proofs of Christianity" as

irrefutable (p.5). Lavater even had the temerity to imply that Socrates would have converted to Christianity after having read this work. Mendelssohn, in an open letter to Lavater included here, points out the hypocrisy of asking a “tolerated minority” to speak out against the majority in relation to truth and justice. Reminding his interlocutor that enlightened theism unites all people, including Christians and Jews, Mendelssohn wrote: “I readily believe that I can recognize the national prejudices and erroneous religious opinions of my fellow citizens, and yet am obliged to remain silent if these errors do not directly lead to the destruction of either natural religion or natural law but rather are accidentally connected to the promotion of the good” (p. 12). In other words, if Lavater genuinely believed in truth and justice, he would not have put Mendelssohn in a position to critique Christianity publicly, thus reminding his audience of the precarious situation of Jews in Christian society.

Because Gottlieb’s volume is the first of its kind, most criticism of it will likely focus on his choice of texts. Mendelssohn’s collected writings fill thousands upon thousands of pages, so the selection of these texts is, as Gottlieb mentions in his introduction, debatable. With his selections, Gottlieb paints a picture of a Mendelssohn *unconflicted*, a thinker whose thought remained consistent across time. Gottlieb is successful in presenting Mendelssohn’s thought as synthesizing the concerns of the Enlightenment with his Judaism.

However, notably missing from Gottlieb’s volume are Mendelssohn’s writings on translation in general, though Gottlieb does include part of Mendelssohn’s introduction to his translations of the Psalms. In the preface to Mendelssohn’s highly idiosyncratic translation of the Hebrew Bible into German (written in Hebrew script), for example, Mendelssohn distances himself from Enlightenment critiques of the Hebrew Bible. He maintains that Moses was the true author of the Bible despite biblical references to Moses in the third person and descriptions of his death. At the same time Mendelssohn defends the canonization of the Hebrew Bible as a necessary evil because of its historical context. In another tension between traditional and Enlightenment perspectives, Mendelssohn even situates himself within a prestigious lineage of Jewish translators of the Bible, maintaining the sanctity of Hebrew as the national language of Jews but arguing that German could emerge as a modern-day Aramaic (i.e., the common language of Jews in antiquity, used even for religious texts). The inclusion of the introduction to his Hebrew Bible translation would provide an even more nuanced portrayal of these tensions in Mendelssohn’s thought. Also, it would provide an important context for Mendelssohn’s philosophical *Nachleben*, in order to contextualize Heinrich Heine’s and Heinrich Graetz’s (perhaps unfair) charges that Mendelssohn was the Jewish Luther, since it is clear that Mendelssohn remained to a large extent stylistically committed to rabbinic and medieval Jewish hermeneutical forms.

Of course, Mendelssohn himself was aware of the methodological dangers in translations of this sort. In the “Introduction to Translation of the Psalms” (1783), while acceding some merit to Luther’s translation of the Hebrew Bible, Mendelssohn writes, “wherever he correctly *translated* something, it seems to me that he also felicitously *Germanized* it; and I have not shied away from the Hebraic figures of speech that he first admitted into the language, even though they may not be proper German” (p. 183; italics in original). Mendelssohn’s observation here is relevant to the translations collected in Gottlieb’s volume. In a few instances, Gottlieb critiques a few other translations of Mendelssohn’s writings into English as “quite free” (p. xxi). It is hard to know exactly what he means by this. For example, Elias Sacks’ English translations of Mendelssohn’s Hebrew writings, included in this volume, sound far more florid and philosophically sophisticated than Mendelssohn’s Hebrew, which I would characterize as “quite free” as well, even though I would call this a strength of the translation. Sacks’ translations are lucid, crisp, and accessible. However, in his introduction, Gottlieb writes “[Mendelssohn] developed such proficiency in German that Christians celebrated his style” (p. xiii). When read in English, both Sacks’ translation of

the Hebrew and Curtis Bowman's translation of the German come across similarly. Again, this can be misleading. Mendelssohn was writing to two audiences, with two different, though not entirely mutually exclusive, goals. Style was important. One of the strongest philosophical influences on Mendelssohn was that of a young Johann Herder who made famous the exhortation that the spirit of a language is inexorably related to the spirit of a people. National renewal through philosophy or literature is intimately tied to its original sources. The differences between the two thinkers are profound yet still subtle enough to require some exigency in translating Mendelssohn's style in both languages.

How does Gottlieb deal with Mendelssohn's biblical allusions? He writes, "If, for example, Mendelssohn writes that the Bible states something, I identify the reference, but if he uses a phrase drawn from the Bible without specifying that he is doing so, I do not supply the reference" (p. xv). I would argue that inclusion of these references would better demonstrate the strength of Mendelssohn's writing. Without explaining Mendelssohn's allusions, puns, and use of rabbinic rhetorical strategies, how can the reader discern, let alone appreciate, the nuances in Mendelssohn's arguments? Why privilege one style of writing—the European-philosophical—over the other—the Hebrew / Rabbinic? My guess is that Gottlieb does this to place Mendelssohn on the shelf with Immanuel Kant and Herder *auf Deutsch* rather than with Rabbis Jacob Emden and Jonathan Eibeschutz in *the aron kodesh*.

These quibbles are, however, small relative to the overall contribution of Gottlieb's work. We should be indebted to Gottlieb for providing the English-speaking community greater access to Mendelssohn, and especially those interested in teaching Mendelssohn's writings (Gottlieb's stated reason for the volume [p. xxii]). Mendelssohn has always deserved a place in our philosophy and general religious studies curricula. Thanks to Gottlieb, this is now possible.