

Judaism without Jews: Philosemitism and Christian Polemic in Early Modern England

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On 4 December 1655, following the arrival in London of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel from Amsterdam and his petition to the Council of State on behalf of the 'Hebrew Nation', a conference was begun at Whitehall to discuss the readmission of Jews to England after a supposed absence of 365 years. Oliver Cromwell himself opened proceedings, which were attended by politicians, soldiers, clergymen, lawyers and merchants. During several meetings, some more private, others more public, an important legal point was established: although Jews had been banished from England by Edward I in 1290 there was no law – either of the land or ordained by God – forbidding their return. Consequently, Jewish immigration could be connived at so long as it was expedient. Indeed, it was said to be economically advantageous for the nation as Jewish trading networks would lower the price of imports and provide new markets for exports. Furthermore, a theologian insisted that kindness to strangers – especially Jews – was a religious duty. But the majority of the clergy, fearful of proselytism, were against readmission. Nonetheless, it was observed that throughout the duration of the conference, which met until 18 December, Cromwell showed himself favourably inclined towards readmitting the Jews. Perhaps, like some delegates, the Protector desired the conversion of the Jews to Protestantism. A few Englishmen went further, believing that the next year would see the fall of Antichrist.

The Whitehall Conference, however, ended without a definite conclusion. Moreover, according to the reports of two Italian envoys from Venice and Tuscany, the majority of English people opposed readmission. Clergymen prayed and preached against it as boldly as they dared or else muttered softly. Even John Dury, a fervent believer in the conversion of the Jews, thought it was best to be wary of the Jews since they had ways 'beyond all other men, to undermine a state'.⁽¹⁾ Similarly, a former royalist governor of

Barbados declared that he was opposed to religious toleration if it meant living among those who rejected Christ. There were also pernicious stories circulating which intermingled accusations revolving around the repulsive if familiar themes of deicide, blasphemy, blood, diabolism, magic and money. Thus it was alleged that Jews celebrated Passover by feasting on matzoth mixed with the blood of murdered Christians; that Jewish seed would adulterate Christian blood; that the Jews intended to buy St. Paul's Cathedral and convert it into a synagogue; that Jewish gold was being used to buy the support of wavering ministers; and that Jewish merchants were prepared to pay fantastical sums for the privilege of resettlement and endenization.

Cromwell therefore reportedly proceeded warily, giving his implicit permission rather than openly declaring his position. In fact, it needs to be emphasized that there was no Act of Parliament, no proclamation from Cromwell, no order from the Council of State either welcoming Jews to England or changing their legal status as a community from aliens (foreigners whose allegiance was due to a foreign state) to denizens (foreigners admitted to residence and granted certain rights, notably to prosecute or defend themselves in law and to purchase or sell land, but still subject to the same customs duties on their goods and merchandise as aliens). The only evidence we have suggests that publicly Cromwell remained undecided on the issue. We can only deduce – as some historians of Anglo-Jewry have done – that Cromwell gave Menasseh a verbal assurance that Jews would be permitted to worship privately in their homes. While this was not the same as allowing them to build a public synagogue, it was in keeping with the spirit of certain clauses of the Instrument of Government of December 1653 which had extended religious toleration to those Protestant sects that did not disturb the peace. However if the actual purpose of Menasseh's mission was to gain official state approval for the readmission of Jews to England – rather than merely asking the authorities to turn a blind eye to their presence – then it must be judged a failure.

All the same England had not been entirely a land without Jews since 1290. As is now well known, fragmentary evidence indicates the intermittent presence of Jews or people of Jewish origin throughout the so-called Middle Period of Anglo-Jewish history (1290–1655). Various cases illustrate that between the Expulsion and the accession of the Tudor dynasty conversion from Judaism to Christianity ensured shelter, particularly in the House for Jewish Converts (*Domus Conversorum*), and occasionally brought financial reward. Jewish physicians, moreover, seem to have been highly valued. After the expulsion of Jews from a number of German-speaking towns and territories, several parts of the Italian Peninsula, Sicily and all of Iberian soil at the end of the 15th century, Jews became widely dispersed, scattered almost to the ends of the known earth. Among the few who made their way to England during the Tudor period were merchants, financiers, clerks, intelligencers, scholars and physicians, as well as a sailor and a mining engineer. These crypto-Jews and, in some instances, genuine converts were predominantly of Castilian or Portuguese origin, though a handful also came from the Italian States. While the length of their stay varied from a few months to the remainder of their lives, altogether more than 125 men, women and children have been identified. Among them were Dr Hector Nuñez, a Portuguese-born New Christian who was made a fellow of the College of Physicians and Royal College of Surgeons; Dunstan Añes, a freeman of the Grocers' Company, spice trader, and financial agent of the Portuguese pretender Don Antonio; and Dr Rodrigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth's chief physician who was executed in June 1594 for his part in an alleged plot to poison her. Yet the two most famous Jews of Elizabethan England appeared only on stage as villains – and neither was English. These were Barabas and Shylock: the Machiavellian central character in Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, and a malicious, vengeful Christian-hating usurer in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

During the Jacobean era a potentially lucrative proposal to settle Jews in Ireland came to nothing. More significantly, according to reports by the Venetian envoy, several Portuguese crypto-Jewish merchants were accused of Judaism and swiftly expelled from England. Although a few crypto-Jews of Iberian origin seem to have escaped detection or resettled in London during the remainder of James's reign, it is noteworthy that English merchants, sailors and travellers continued having commercial dealings or encounters with Jews overseas, particularly in Venice and the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, during the English Civil War it was rumoured that certain Amsterdam Jewish merchants had been persuaded to purchase and export the goods of Londoners who had remained loyal to the Crown and defaulted on their payments of the Parliamentary

assessment. Though this was denied, it is clear that Antonio Carvajal, a crypto-Jew born overseas who had arrived in England about 1635, was involved in shipping barrels of gunpowder from Amsterdam to Dover. An importer of plate and bullion, as well as wine from the Canary Islands, Carvajal was a leading figure in London's clandestine Jewish community. Granted an endenization along with his two sons Alonso and Joseph on 31 July 1655, he afterwards signed a 21-year lease for a brick tenement on Creechurch Lane in the parish of Katherine Creechurch. By March 1657 this structure was being converted into a synagogue.

Another prominent crypto-Jewish figure was António Rodrigues Robles, a wealthy merchant of Duke's Place in London's East end. On 13 March 1656 legal proceedings were begun against Robles, who was accused of being a Spanish national (England was at war with Spain at that time so his goods and property were liable for confiscation). This affair was very significant because it forced other prominent members of London's secret Jewish community out into the open. Accordingly on 24 March seven men, including Menasseh and Carvajal, petitioned Cromwell for permission to practise Judaism privately in their homes, to go about unmolested and to have a burial place outside the City for their dead. Cromwell referred it to the consideration of the Council of State, who returned the Jews' petition to him on 26 June 1656 – apparently without recording the details of their discussion. This is important because a few famous historians of Anglo-Jewry such as Albert Hyamson and Cecil Roth have argued that the Council responded positively to the petition but that the crucial document was later destroyed. Although sceptics like H. S. Q. Henriques, Moses Gaster, and more recently David Katz, were correct to dismiss this as baseless speculation 1656 is nevertheless now widely trumpeted as an irreversible moment that marked the gradual informal readmission of Jews to England.

The first and best chapter of Glaser's brief book – there are only 132 pages of text – examines the circumstances in which this anniversary was manufactured and the elaborate ways it has since been commemorated. As she observes in her introduction, throughout 2006 there was 'a calendar of events to celebrate the 350th anniversary' including a festival in Trafalgar Square, a commemorative service at Bevis Marks synagogue attended by Tony Blair, concerts, lectures, and banquets (p. 1). Beginning with mid 17th-, 18th- and early 19th-century interpretations of 1656 – ranging from the scheming goldsmith Thomas Violet's *A Petition Against the Jewes* (1661), to D'Blossiers Tovey's *Anglia Judaica* (Oxford, 1738), to William Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth of England* (1824–8) – Glaser identifies the Victorian age as the crucial period during which the Anglo-Jewish community's view of its origins changed. She attributes this partly to 'Victorian philosemitism' (p. 17), derived from a genteel missionary impulse in Protestantism, partly to 'Parliamentary Emancipation', which enabled Baron de Rothschild to take up a seat in the House of Commons in 1858. Thereafter the 'history of the Jews in England was consolidated and institutionalised' (p. 19). Thus an exhibition of Anglo-Jewish history was held at the Royal Albert Hall in 1887, while in 1893 the Jewish Historical Society of England was founded. The first 'Resettlement Day' was held in 1894 with large-scale 250th anniversary celebrations in 1906. At a commemorative speech at the latter event Lucien Wolf, a pioneering historian of Anglo-Jewry, presented Cromwell and Menasseh, Christian and Jew, as "standing together in the dawn of English liberty, twin champion of a wronged people". Yet in contrast to their "spirit of toleration" that shone like a beacon, "dark places" still lingered "on the face of God's earth" (p. 7). For a wave of antisemitism had swept across continental Europe resulting in the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews to England. This in turn bred xenophobic resentment culminating in the Aliens Act of 1905.

While the so-called Resettlement was certainly de facto if not de jure a watershed, Glaser is still right to highlight 'a foundational historical tradition' as well as the vindictory tendency running through the writings of its first practitioners (pp. 1–2, 7, 19, 27). Indeed, her argument chimes with some recent work in challenging the traditional optimistic, perhaps even self-serving, picture of hitherto rootless persecuted aliens transformed through a strong current of Protestant philo-Semitism into grateful beneficiaries of a uniquely English form of religious toleration based upon the peculiarities of common law.

Her second chapter on the relationship between puritans and Judaism discusses printed controversies and polemical strategies; the mockery of puritan characters on the 17th-century stage by playwrights such as Robert Davenport and Ben Jonson; the growing interest in Hebrew among zealous Protestant scholars,

especially the work of Hugh Broughton; the identification of Protestant England with God's elect nation and associated borrowings from English translations of the Old Testament to present an image of the self-regarding godly as latter-day children of Israel whose exodus from the state church left them wandering towards a promised land of religious reform; continental influences on puritan Hebraism; Broughton's use of Hebrew sources to explain the nature of Christ's descent into Hell; John Selden's Hebrew scholarship and the controversy generated by his *Historie of Tithes* (1618); Judaizing – that is the practise of following Jewish customs or religious rites, notably the case of Somerset-born separatist minister John Traske, whose early teaching emphasized Old Testament legalism and who kept Jewish dietary laws as well as observing the Sabbath on Saturday; and finally the Easter controversy, which was exacerbated by proposed reform of the Julian calendar and competing interpretations of British ecclesiastical history. Not all of this fits comfortably under the rubric 'Puritans and Judaism: From Scholarship to Sedition'. Nor unfortunately is there much new here. Most of this has been done before, done at greater length and done better.

Glaser's third chapter is entitled 'Anglicans and Judaism: From Ceremony to Legalism'. Her point here is that 'Christian interest in Judaism in the early modern period was not restricted to Puritans' (p. 65). Accordingly she looks at debates about the validity of church ceremonies and the worship of God 'in the beauty of holiness' (Psalm 29:2), which became ever more acrimonious during the Laudian ascendancy. Glaser convincingly demonstrates that 'ceremonialists increasingly justified their promotion of physical, architectural and aesthetic forms of worship by appealing to Jewish precedents' (p. 68). Indeed, the recurring motifs of these controversies are divergent or ambivalent attitudes towards the Jewish Tabernacle and Temple. Thus ceremonialists invoked them as precedents, while their opponents compared Jewish religious rituals with Popish superstitions. Glaser also considers revived interest in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court, particularly its appropriateness as a model of church government. This is then connected with Christian understanding of Mosaic Law which, from Thomas Aquinas onwards, had been conventionally divided into three categories – the moral, judicial and ceremonial. As other scholars have shown and she notes, this had critical implications both for the payment of tithes and Sabbath observance.

Chapter four examines religious toleration, a familiar subject with an extensive literature. Glaser's approach is to emphasize the extent to which its development was 'built on Jewish ideas' (p. 94). Predictably she focuses on Roger Williams and his 1644 tract *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, debates held by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, and Richard Overton's *The Araignment of Mr. Persecution* (1645). Again, I am sorry to say there is nothing new here. Though Glaser insists on the novelty of linking these texts with debates about the relationship between church and state, it is well known that Cromwellian Parliaments debated the limits of liberty of conscience – principally in the cases of John Biddle and James Nayler, and that the authority of civil magistrates to enforce a judicial definition of blasphemy was questioned.

The last chapter concerns the Whitehall Conference together with motives for and against readmission. This too has been dealt with exhaustively and extremely well, notably by David Katz. Even so, Glaser does have something to add by reading William Prynne's *A Short Demurrer To the Jewes Long discontinued barred Remitter into England* (1656) as in part a response to Hugh Peter's *Good work for a good magistrate* (1651), which advocated burning obsolete common law precedents and replacing them with the moral law and other Jewish exemplars. Her suggestion that it was felt a Jewish presence would 'threaten an evolving sense of English nationhood' (p. 128), however, needs to be supported by more evidence.

All in all then, *Judaism without Jews* makes several valid points and contributes to the sizeable literature on the subject. Furthermore, while one of Glaser's conclusions is a statement of the obvious – namely the 'centrality of Jewish ideas and scholarship to early modern Christians' (p. 130) – another should give us pause for thought:

It is not hard to understand why Jewish historians of Victorian England, writing in the context of mass immigration and rising anti-semitism, would have wanted to cultivate a positive

tradition of Anglo-Jewish history. Their priority was the recovery of a body of evidence which pointed to the progressively tolerant attitude of early modern English Christians towards Jews. Those nineteenth-century pressures may have disappeared, but they have left a lasting legacy; and the modern emphasis on the celebration of multiculturalism and religious identity fosters a view of the past which is similarly essentialist and teleological (p. 132).

Notes

1. John Dury, *A Case of Conscience, Whether it be Lawful to Admit Jews into a Christian Commonwealth?* (London, 1656), p. 9. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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