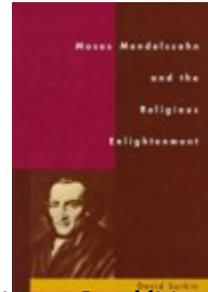


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Sorkin. *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. xxv + 214 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20261-0.

Reviewed by Robert Liberles (Ben Gurion University, Beersheva, Israel)
Published on H-German (September, 1997)



The term *Haskalah* denoting the Jewish Enlightenment is employed rather broadly to indicate a movement that spread from central Europe in the mid-eighteenth century to include eastern Europe a century later. Scholars continue to discuss the similarities and differences between the earlier German-based movement and the later variations. Generally, the German version placed greater emphasis on Jewish intellectual integration into its host milieu. Those Russian figures with similar ambitions soon realized that there was little for them to seek out in Russian cultural circles. Michael Stanislawski has portrayed one of the leading examples in his study of Y.L. Gordon, aptly entitled *For Whom Do I Toil?* after one of Gordon's most famous poems.

Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) was by far the single most dominating figure of the German-Jewish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. He is considered the founding father and continual reference point for measuring later developments. It would almost seem that David Sorkin has taken scholarly life in hand in turning his considerable long-proven abilities to a study of this eighteenth century Jewish philosopher. Alexander Altmann's monumental study *Moses Mendelssohn, A Biographical Study* (1973) seemed to have left little more to do on the subject. Sorkin has delineated two primary objectives for such a work. One is to make Mendelssohn's life more accessible to the general reader than it is in Altmann's 760 pages of text and hundred pages of notes. The second, more substantive objective is to expand on the duality in Mendelssohn's thinking between the Jewish world and that of the German Enlightenment.

Certainly Sorkin has fulfilled his first objective admirably, providing a succinct presentation of Mendelssohn's writings, his thinking, and his place

in the intellectual currents of his times. In addition, Sorkin has also raised important questions concerning Mendelssohn's inner and outer balance between the two intellectual spheres in which he moved. Sorkin depicts two polar views of Mendelssohn's enterprise: one in which Mendelssohn successfully harmonized the calling of being a Jew within the world of modern European culture; the other, in which Mendelssohn misperceived the forces around him and preached a message that could not succeed and resulted in a significant march toward conversion. Other writers portrayed a stronger conflict between the poles. Graphically memorable is the evaluation by the nineteenth-century theologian Solomon Steinheim that Mendelssohn was "a heathen in his brain and a Jew in his body" (p. xviii).

How is one to explain the apparent duality in Mendelssohn? Is it sufficient to term Mendelssohn a transitional figure with one foot in two rings? Would it even be accurate to do so, thus underplaying his strong commitment to continued Jewish vitality? Sorkin expresses the problem that most depictions of the duality describe but fail to explain: they "portray yet [are] unable to link the two realms of Mendelssohn's activity. [They] cannot account for both his full belief in revealed religion and his full-scale participation in Enlightenment thinking" (p. xxi). "The missing link," in Sorkin's words, is to be found in the religious enlightenment. "Common wisdom has long had it that there was an irreconcilable hostility between the Enlightenment and established religion" (p. xxi). Sorkin sets out to demonstrate that an entire wing of Enlightenment thinking was religious in nature and that it was within this philosophical tendency that Mendelssohn's thinking found its niche.

Moses Mendelssohn was born in Dessau and fol-

lowed his rabbi and mentor David Fraenkel to Berlin in 1743. It was at this point that Mendelssohn seriously undertook secular studies outside the world of traditional Jewish scholarship. A decade later Lessing and he became acquainted, and their friendship soon exemplified in Sorkin's words "the Enlightenment's ability to surmount religious differences." Of course, Jews and Christians had maintained intellectual contacts in earlier times as well, but the friendship between Lessing and Mendelssohn attracted considerable attention in its day and continues to do so in the scholarly literature. During the 1750s and 60s, Mendelssohn wrote several philosophical discourses, including his prize-winning "Treatise on Certainty in Metaphysical Philosophy," for a contest in which Immanuel Kant also competed.

As Mendelssohn became more fully integrated into Berlin Enlightenment circles, his prominence continued to underscore the anomaly of a traditional Jew at the center of Berlin's intellectual circles. His encounter with the Swiss cleric Johann Lavater brought many of these underlying issues to the foreground. Lavater and Mendelssohn had met during the mid 1760s. Somewhat reluctantly, Mendelssohn agreed to some private conversations on the subject of Jesus. Lavater had sworn to maintain the privacy of these conversations. But in 1769, Lavater recounted those discussion while dedicating a French work of Christian theology in German translation to Mendelssohn with the challenge: "to refute it publicly in case you find the essential arguments adduced in support of the facts of Christianity to be incorrect: in case, however, you find them correct, to do what prudence, love of truth, and honesty bid you do; what Socrates would have done, had he read this treatise and found it irrefutable."

It is unfortunate that the Lavater affair is the best-known single incident in Mendelssohn's illustrious career, but it also revealed certain significant forces that were at play at the time. Historians still debate the extent of their significance, and this is one of the differences between Sorkin and Altmann. Lavater's challenge provided a direct attack on the notion of toleration. Mendelssohn was called upon to enter a religious disputation by refuting Bonnet's arguments on behalf of Christianity. In his response, Mendelssohn explained that his refusal to en-

ter the debate derived from the inferior legal status that governed the Jewish community, almost pedantically rationalizing to Lavater the simple politics of minority existence.

Sorkin's succinct emphasis on the flow of ideas better highlights for the reader the influence on Mendelssohn's thought of Christian Wolf and the religious Enlightenment in general than Altmann's detailed biographical descriptions. But conversely, Altmann provides the reader with a better sense of the inner turmoil caused to Mendelssohn by the Lavater affair. Each approach is bound to surpass in the appropriate issues. Sorkin and Altmann also relate differently to the significance of the Lavater episode in the unfolding of Mendelssohn's biography. For Sorkin, Mendelssohn effectively forced Lavater to withdraw the public pressure, resulting in Lavater's isolation and what Sorkin calls "the triumph of toleration." For Altmann, the affair represented all the greater a threat to Mendelssohn precisely because Lavater was not isolated in his hopes to see Mendelssohn convert to Christianity. By extension, Sorkin presents a greater continuous flow in Mendelssohn's intellectual interests, while Altmann delineates more succinctly defined periods of activity.

Sorkin's volume is well written and well researched; its relative slimness belies its rich and at times obtuse bibliographic references. Mendelssohn's career of varied intellectual and leadership activities unfolds smoothly and coherently. It is unfortunate only that Sorkin did not go beyond a brief statement about parallel developments in German Catholicism and harness more of his insights into the broader dimensions of the religious enlightenment. Sorkin ends his study with a picturesque description of the changing images of Mendelssohn through the ages. From the symbol *par excellence* of toleration, Mendelssohn became for some over the course of the nineteenth century the symbol of abandonment of Jewish identity. By focusing on Mendelssohn's Jewish writings and especially those in Hebrew, Sorkin has sought the restore the balance—and the tension.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Robert Liberles. Review of Sorkin, David, *Moses Mendelssohn and the Religious Enlightenment*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1277>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.